ISRAEL'S SECRET WARS

A History of
Israel's Intelligence Services

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Authors' Note

Many people, especially those involved in the Haganah, the Jewish Agency or the Zionist establishment, Hebraized their names (sometimes first names as well as surnames) during the mandatory period and in the early years after independence in 1948. The practice followed throughout this book has been to give first the original name with the new one in brackets and then to use just the new name. Thus Reuven Zaslani (Shiloah) later becomes Reuven Shiloah, Moshe Shertok (Sharett) becomes Moshe Sharett.

Acknowledgements

In writing this book, we have tried to use as much original documentation as possible and have invariably indicated the source of our information (broadly document, interview, book or newspaper). Large parts of the narrative are based on interviews with former Israeli intelligence personnel from all three services. A surprisingly large number were willing to speak, although only a tiny handful agreed to be identified. Many were prevented by law from allowing their names to be published and expressed frustration that this was so. Some non-Israeli sources preferred anonymity.

We have also drawn heavily on Israeli and foreign newspapers, journals and books – but always carefully separating the wheat from the chaff. Throughout we have made strenuous efforts at verification from two or more independent sources. The bulk of the book has been read over by retired intelligence officers, although any errors of fact or interpretation that may have crept in are, of course, our own.

We have been handicapped by the irritating but unavoidable fact that whatever we wrote would ultimately have to pass through the sieve of Israeli military censorship. But the censors treated our finished product with far greater liberalism than we had expected or than anyone could have enjoyed only a few years ago. Surprisingly little had to be deleted from the original, finished manuscript (and this only after all possible appeal procedures had been exhausted).

Far too many people have helped with this project to be

mentioned by name. Many of those who can be have been credited in the notes at the end of the book; some of those whose assistance was priceless still cannot be publicly thanked. This is one of the unfortunate occupational hazards of being involved in, and writing about, intelligence.

Introduction

Just off Israel's Mediterranean coastal highway, a few miles north of Tel Aviv, a cluster of unremarkable grey-white concrete buildings can be made out through a line of dusty eucalyptus trees that runs roughly parallel to the main road. Turn left after the busy Glilot junction, past the soldiers waiting for lifts, and there, hidden in the centre of the cluster, yet clearly signposted for all the world to see, lies a fine public memorial to over 400 Israelis who died while serving in their country's intelligence services.

The monument, fittingly enough perhaps, is built in the form of a maze, an interlocking complex of smooth stone walls engraved with the names of the fallen, and by each name is the date of death. It is divided into five chronological sections, beginning in November 1947 – when the United Nations voted to partition British-ruled Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states – and ending (so far) in February 1989. The section covering the last fifteen years is entitled 'the beginnings of peace' but it still lists more than 200 names. More blank walls, backing on to a grassy outdoor amphitheatre, are available for future use.

The monument should be a spycatcher's dream. But the hand of official secrecy lies heavily even on the dead. Names and dates yes, but there are no ranks, no units, no places, no hints of the circumstances in which these unknown soldiers lost their lives. Some died naturally after long years in the shadows, yet most of these are still as anonymous as the many others who fell on active service.

A few of their stories have been told, though most are covered in a heavy patina of heroic myth. There, from the early days, is Ya'akov Buqa'i, executed in Jordan in 1949 after filtering in disguise through the ceasefire lines together with hundreds of released Arab prisoners of war. There are Max Binnet and Moshe Marzuk, who died in Egyptian prison in the mid-1950s after the exposure of the famous Israeli sabotage network at the centre of the Lavon Affair. There are Eli Cohen, the legendary spy who penetrated the highest echelons of the Syrian government and was hanged, live on television, in Damascus in 1965; Baruch Cohen, the Mossad agent-runner shot dead in Madrid by a Palestinian gunman in 1973; Moshe Golan, a Shin Bet security service officer murdered by a West Bank informer in a safe house inside Israel in 1980; Ya'akov Barsimantov, a Mossad man assassinated in Paris weeks before the invasion of Lebanon in 1982; and Victor Rejwan, a Shin Bet man killed in a shoot-out with Muslim militants in Gaza just before the outbreak of the Palestinian uprising in 1987.

A little knowledge and imagination can help with the majority of names that are still unknown to the wider public. A cluster of men killed in June 1967 and a larger number who died between October and December 1973 are the losses of army field intelligence units during the Six Day and Yom Kippur wars. Another group who died on the same day in November 1983 comprised Shin Bet agents blown up by a Shi'ite Muslim suicide bomber in the southern Lebanese city of Tyre. But most of the names remain mysterious, impenetrable and unyielding as tombstones. Only the breakdown of the total fatalities (available until mid-1988) reflects the different roles – and degree of exposure to mortal danger – of the three separate services that make up Israel's intelligence community: army intelligence, 261; the Shin Bet, eighty; the Mossad, sixty-five.

Israel has many war memorials. Different military units – the paratroops, the air force and the tank corps – have all erected monuments to the men and women they have lost in five full-scale conventional wars (six if the 1968–70 'war of attrition' on the Suez Canal is counted) and four decades of cross-border incursions and anti-guerrilla operations. The memorial to the fallen of the intelligence community at Glilot was erected in 1984 as a result of pressure from bereaved families, who felt that the contribution of their relations to national security had not been given adequate public recognition. A few of the 415 men and women whose names are engraved on its walls are still buried in unmarked graves or under assumed names in the Arab countries where they operated.

The monument is as unique as it is bizarre, a taut compromise between the harsh demands of official secrecy and the need for recognition for those whose loved ones lived and died in anonymity. There is probably nowhere else on earth that, proportionate to its size and population, produces, analyses or consumes as much intelligence as Israel, a country of 4 million people that has been in a state of war for every moment of its forty-three-year existence and sees its future depending, perhaps more than ever before, on the need to 'know' its enemies, predict their intentions and frustrate their plans.

Intelligence is an expanding business. The British writer Phillip Knightley has calculated that in the mid-1980s over a million people, spending £17,500 million annually, were engaged worldwide in what he irreverently reminded spy buffs was called 'the second oldest profession'.[1]

Serious study of the subject is growing too. In the academic world intelligence is starting to receive attention as the 'missing dimension' without which politics, war, diplomacy, terrorism and international relations cannot be properly understood.[2] The United States, with a unique though often threatened tradition of relative openness in such matters, has taken the lead in the field. But there has been impressive progress elsewhere. In Britain historians like Christopher Andrew have shown that hard work and imaginative research methods can circumvent some of the more absurd restrictions of official secrecy, clumsy 'weeding' and censorship in the name of national security. Learned journals, symposia and multi-